

## RUSSIA'S INFLUENCE IN THE BALKANS: CHALLENGES FOR SUPPORTING UKRAINE IN COUNTERING RUSSIAN ARMED AGGRESSION

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*With the beginning of a full-scale war against Ukraine, the Russian Federation continues to use the Balkan region as a springboard for the spread of hybrid influences and maintaining tension in Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. The difference lies in deeper systemic penetrations into countries, using propaganda, soft power politics, social networks, the church. Russia has strengthened its position in countries about which Ukrainian media write very little. These are Albania, Slovenia, Croatia, North Macedonia, Greece. That is, the bet is made not only on Orthodox countries, which the Kremlin considers its own traditional spheres of influence – Bulgaria, Serbia, Montenegro, Romania.*

*The growing presence of the Russian factor is felt through media, cultural, scientific, academic institutions, social networks, in particular Telegram, the number of users in the Balkans is growing. Russia invests heavily in supporting pro-Russian politicians who relay narratives that benefit the Kremlin. Therefore, attention in the region should be paid not only to Serbia, Kosovo and Bosnia and Herzegovina. It is worth studying other countries, for example, Montenegro, Albania, Slovenia, Croatia, North Macedonia, where many supporters of the "Russian world", pro-Russian media and politicians work, there are tendencies to favor the so-called liberal Russians. Since this negatively affects the Ukrainian vision of the war unleashed by the Russian Federation against Ukraine, the consequences may be the revision by individual countries of the region of the sanctions policy towards Russians, issuing them visas for a long stay abroad within the Schengen zone and the EU, the pressure of societies on the authorities to provide military assistance to Ukraine, the implementation of bilateral projects in the defense or humanitarian spheres. Also, because of this, there is a threat of a wider spread of narratives about so-called "civil war" in Ukraine, oppression of the Russian-speaking population, the need for regionalization and the introduction of a special status for Russians in Ukraine.*

*This note also considers the destabilizing role of Russian Orthodoxy, which is part of the policy of soft power of the Russian Federation and an important tool for strengthening ties between Moscow and the Balkan countries, the Russian diaspora and Ukrainians who have found temporary shelter in the region. It is a comprehensive review of Russia's activities in the Balkans that allows us to see the threats that the aggressor country creates here and uses against Ukraine and other countries. This approach will allow Ukraine to show the Balkan countries the real threat of the "Russian world" and its destructive presence at the social, state and regional levels.*

## Assessment of the situation

For years, Russian policy in the Balkans relied on Bulgaria, Greece, Serbia, Montenegro, and Republika Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina). Especially in this list were Bulgaria and Serbia, for which Moscow is a "brotherly" country because of its long historical, cultural and diplomatic ties. On this basis, the Russian Federation was building its propaganda and soft power policy towards these countries. According to a similar scenario, the Kremlin worked with Greece and Montenegro. Nothing had to be created for Republika Srpska, since Russian diplomacy was behind its recognition in Dayton in November 1995<sup>1</sup>. Since then, this entity of Bosnia and Herzegovina, together with its leadership and authorities, has been loyal satellites of the Kremlin in the Balkans, helping to undermine the region and acting as a fairly solid springboard for the spread of Russian disinformation and propaganda.

With other countries of the region, Russia has traditionally strengthened economic, financial and political ties. Slovenia, Croatia, Albania, North Macedonia, Romania were mainly objects of the Kremlin's economic expansion, which was supported by additional efforts in the field of cultural and public diplomacy. During the years of such hybrid activity, Russians managed to form a positive image of their state in these countries, strengthen cooperation in the educational, academic, information spheres, and implement various bilateral projects. That is why in these countries, with the beginning of Russia's full-scale aggression against Ukraine, narratives about the so-called liberal Russians, "the cycle of Russian culture" and "strong Russia" continue to exist.

Russophilia in the Balkans continues to be the foundation for the spread of propaganda and disinformation. Main institutions:

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<sup>1</sup> The representative of the Russian Federation was a member of the Contact Group created to conduct the negotiation process during the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1992 - 1995. The activity of the Contact Group continued during the war in Kosovo. It included the USA, Great Britain, Russia, Italy, Germany and France. Russia consistently advocated the idea of conducting negotiations not only with Slobodan Milosevic, but also with the Bosnian Serbs. Under pressure from the Russian Federation, the Serbian delegation formed for the trip to Dayton in November 1995 included representatives of Bosnian Serbs. They were also present at the negotiations held in 1992-1995 between the parties to the conflict under the auspices of the international community. Russia, like the USA, Great Britain, Germany, France, and the European Union, acted as a party that witnessed the conclusion of the Dayton Agreements.



- cultural and educational: Russian centers in Maribor (Slovenia)<sup>2</sup>, Podgorica (Montenegro)<sup>3</sup> and Nikshichi (Montenegro), the Russian Cultural Center at the Babes-Boyai University (the FB page has not been maintained since 2022, on the university's website the center continues to be on the list of foreign cultural centers; in the media there was no information about the termination of the activities of this particular institution)<sup>4</sup>, Russian Center at the University of Saints Cyril and Methodius (Skopje, North Macedonia)<sup>5</sup>, Russian House (Ruskii dom) Κέντρο Εκμάθησης Ρώσικης γλώσσας (Afni, Greece)<sup>6</sup> and Russian Word Center of the Russian language and Culture (Thessaloniki, Greece)<sup>7</sup>, perhaps there is still an operating Russian center at the Thracian University of Democritus (Thrace, Greece), they did not write anywhere about its closure; in Bulgaria continue to operate in Sofia, Varna, Plovdiv, Pleven, Stara-Zagora, Burgas<sup>8</sup>. In Serbia and Republika Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina), such institutions are also present.
- academic and educational: Adriatic School (Montenegro), Russian private schools in Montenegro, Serbia, Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria; Universities – Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences (Budva, Montenegro), opened by Russians in cooperation with Montenegrin specialists, having received in February of this year accreditation for the provision of educational services from the Agency for the Control and Quality Assurance of Higher Education<sup>9</sup>; branch of Lomonosov Moscow State University (Koper, Slovenia). The branch was opened in 2017, in May of this year, Russian media reported that Russia offered to close this university in Slovenia.
- public organizations: quite actively involved in the social life of the countries of the region and began to receive grant funding from various European states, the EU and the USA.
- The Serbian Orthodox Church: does not hide its ties with the Russian Orthodox Church, acts as a repeater of the Kremlin narratives about the war of the Russian Federation against Ukraine, focuses on the "fraternal relations" of Serbs, Montenegrins with Russians, is an important political player in the political and social life of the

<sup>2</sup> Ruski center v Mariboru <https://www.facebook.com/ruskicentermaribor>

<sup>3</sup> Ruski centar v Podgorici [https://www.facebook.com/ruscentarpg/?locale=sr\\_RS](https://www.facebook.com/ruscentarpg/?locale=sr_RS)

<sup>4</sup> Russian Cultural Centre [https://www.ubbcluj.ro/en/structura/unitati/centre\\_culturale\\_straine](https://www.ubbcluj.ro/en/structura/unitati/centre_culturale_straine)

<sup>5</sup> Интервју со Дарко Несторов – наставник по руски јазик на Рускиот центар при Универзитетот „Св. Кирил и Методиј“, 9 април, 2024 <https://antropol.mk/2024/04/09/%D0%B8%D0%BD%D1%82%D0%B5%D1%80%D0%B2%D1%98%D1%83-%D1%81%D0%BE-%D0%B4%D0%B0%D1%80%D0%BA%D0%BE-%D0%BD%D0%B5%D1%81%D1%82%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%B2-%D0%BD%D0%B0%D1%81%D1%82%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%BD%D0%B8%D0%BA/>

<sup>6</sup> Russkidom Κέντρο Εκμάθησης Ρώσικης γλώσσας <https://russkidom.gr/>; <https://www.facebook.com/centerrusskidom/>

<sup>7</sup> Russian Word <https://russianword.gr/>; <https://www.facebook.com/russianword.gr>

<sup>8</sup> Руски център <https://ruskicentar.bg/about-us/contact/>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.rtvbudva.me/vijesti/u-budvi-se-otvara-fakultet-ruskih-profesora-u-egzilu/76893>; <https://liberalarts.me/mne>

Republika Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina), Montenegro, North Macedonia, Albania, Greece and Bulgaria.

- humanitarian organizations: the most famous Russian humanitarian center in Nis, which the United States considers the center of the Russian spy network in the Balkans.
- One of the key roles in spreading and maintaining Russophile moods is played by the departments of Russian Studies in higher education institutions, teachers of history, political science, literature and language. Academic exchanges between universities continue, which only exacerbates Russophilia in the region.

These institutions contribute to another function – the rapid spread of anti-Ukrainian narratives in society. This is necessary in order to justify Russia's "righteous" role in the war against Ukraine. *Russians focus on the following points:*

- Ukraine does not have its own history, culture, identity, language, because it is part of Russian history and statehood.
- The Orthodox Church of Ukraine is schismatic and non-apostolic, it departs from the principles of Orthodoxy. True Orthodoxy is preached by Russia and Serbia.
- Crimea is Russian and the southeastern regions of Ukraine have always been part of the so-called "Novorossiya".
- The power in Ukraine is illegitimate, since in 2014 President Viktor Yanukovich was forced to leave the country due to a "coup d'etat".
- Ukraine acts as a NATO training ground; the alliance has long placed military bases on Ukrainian territory.
- NATO and the EU are developing ground operations in Ukraine, so the Balkan countries decided to return compulsory military service.

Thus, Russian propaganda and disinformation are based on historical and emotional narratives that ordinary citizens believe in without verifying information. Especially such narratives find fertile ground in Serbia, Montenegro, Bulgaria, Republika Srpska (BiH). Although in Croatia, North Macedonia, Slovenia, Romania and Greece, societies are just as easily perceived by such messages of Moscow, since they are voiced by pro-Russian politicians and representatives of various organizations, which are quite popular among the population.

## Channels for spreading disinformation and propaganda

First, these are the already mentioned pro-Russian politicians (Presidents of Bulgaria Rumen Radev, Croatia Zoran Milanovic<sup>10</sup>, Serbia Aleksandar Vucic, Republika Srpska (BiH)

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<sup>10</sup> Зоран Міланович у бази Миротворець <https://myrotvorets.center/criminal/milanovich-zoran/>

Milorad Dodik, leader of the Romanian party S.O.S. Diana Shoshoake<sup>11</sup>, Speaker of the Montenegrin Parliament Andreja Mandić, a member of the Slovenian Resni.ca Party and a journalist who worked for a long time in Moscow, Polona Frelj<sup>12</sup>).

They actively cooperate with pro-Russian media in the Balkans, in which the Kremlin constantly invests money. The main mouthpieces are Russia Today Balkan and Sputnik, which have their own web versions, and Russia Today Balkan broadcasts in YouTube format. These propaganda tools are openly working in Serbia and Republika Srpska, with the authorities from the end of 2023, negotiations are underway to launch Russia Today Balkan in a full-fledged television format<sup>13</sup>.

Another channel that is becoming increasingly popular in the Balkan countries is Telegram. Active use began after a full-scale invasion, when a significant part of Russian citizens moved to Serbia and Montenegro. Mainly from Serbia from the Russian environment, the practice of installing Telegrams and reading from there news about the war of the Russian Federation against Ukraine was adopted by the Serbs. Then this social network became popular in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro. It is also actively used in other countries, especially in those where the Cyrillic alphabet is the basis of the alphabet. However, the Russians went further, and create Telegram channels aimed at users from countries where Latin is common. Therefore, the number of groups with propaganda materials written in Croatian, Slovenian, Albanian, Greek is constantly growing on the social network. For example, the Telegram channel InfoDefense<sup>14</sup> has groups in Bulgarian, Slovenian, Greek, Serbian, Romanian (there are other languages, about 30 in total, among the languages – Hebrew, Persian, Japanese, Turkish, Arabic). Channels are created by Russians themselves in order to spread their vision of events in Ukraine, the world, and Russia. There are quite popular Telegram bloggers who run their channels and spread anti-Ukrainian, anti-EU and anti-NATO narratives, sympathize with Serbs in Serbia, Kosovo, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina. Balkan media have repeatedly written about these channels and individual studies have been done<sup>15</sup>. The most promoted among the Russian Telegram-channels are *Balkanyst*, *Balkanskaia spletnytsa*, *Balkanskyi shryon* (*Балканист*, *Балканская сплетница*, *Балканский шпион*).

<sup>11</sup> Діана Шошоакє у базі Миротворець <https://myrotvorets.center/criminal/shoshoake-dyana-yovanovych/>

<sup>12</sup> Полонє Фрєлїх у базі Миротворець <https://myrotvorets.center/criminal/freljkh-polonca/>

<sup>13</sup> Ruska državna televizija najavila kanal na srpskom jeziku u BiH, 15 Decembar, 2023, Glas Amerike [https://ba.voanews.com/a/ruska-drzavna-televizija-najavila-kanal-na-srpskom-jeziku-u-bih/7399317.html?utm\\_medium=social-media&utm\\_campaign=russia-today&utm\\_source=facebook&fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAR2H5ksK6quCShtenFxmfmq0kzKj270wgggJ2p1iZ0B2Kovh7zPqgAK4gBE\\_aem\\_r4WJTRqDaZxQG8YguJIMbw](https://ba.voanews.com/a/ruska-drzavna-televizija-najavila-kanal-na-srpskom-jeziku-u-bih/7399317.html?utm_medium=social-media&utm_campaign=russia-today&utm_source=facebook&fbclid=IwZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAR2H5ksK6quCShtenFxmfmq0kzKj270wgggJ2p1iZ0B2Kovh7zPqgAK4gBE_aem_r4WJTRqDaZxQG8YguJIMbw)

<sup>14</sup> <https://t.me/InfoDefAll>

<sup>15</sup> Šta korisnici sa Balkana čitaju na ruskim Telegram kanalima?, European Western Balkans, 29 February, 2024, <https://europeanwesternbalkans.rs/sta-korisnici-sa-balkana-citaju-na-ruskim-telegram-kanalima/>; Aleksadner Palikot As Telegram's Popularity Soars, Is It 'A Spy In Every Ukrainian's Pocket'?, Radio Free Europe, 1 May 2024, <https://www.rferl.org/a/telegram-ukraine-disinformation-regulation-russia/32927872.html>

Russian propagandists turn Telegram into a purposeful tool for educating Serbian bloggers with anti-Ukrainian and anti-European views. On June 19, 2024, the Institute for the Study of War wrote about this, indicating that the "Rybar Media School" (Russian blogger Mikhail Zvinchuk, host of the Rybar channel) was opened in Belgrade, which engages in open propaganda among journalists, PR specialists, heads of information institutions, officials. In a post on April 25 of this year, Zvinchuk wrote about visiting the Republika Srpska (Bosnia and Herzegovina)<sup>16</sup>.

Informational influence occurs with the help of newspapers, which in the region sin reprinting materials from unverified resources, sources and sites. For the most part, information is taken from Serbian web portals or foreign ones, where they also do not aim to find out the original source of the origin of specific data or analytical articles. This leads to the rapid spread of false and provocative information throughout the Balkan countries. In April-May of this year, sites of the Russian agency Pravda were launched in most Balkan countries. These are purely news resources that publish materials from Russian agencies, sites, Telegram-channels, Sputnik and Russia Today. They focus on the internal life of each country, its foreign policy, NATO, the EU, Ukraine and international relations. All publications are published in the languages of the countries where the sites operate. Pravda research in Europe was done by the European Digital Media Observatory platform, whose experts believe that the Russians used Pravda sites to influence the votes of voters before the elections to the European Parliament<sup>17</sup>.

This also helps television, the owners and editors of which rarely conduct serious investigations into the information provided. In addition, TV channels continue to be tools for promoting Russophilia and Russian propaganda. In the programs of broadcasts of Croatia, Slovenia, North Macedonia, Bosnia and Herzegovina in recent years there are historical series or criminal dramas of Russian production ("*Crown of the Russian Empire*", "*Brigade*"). There are also programs about tourism, shot in English, but translated into Russian.

A separate channel for the mass distribution of Russian propaganda narratives and hybrid influences is the Orthodox Church (in Serbia – the largest, in Montenegro – the strong position of the Serbian Orthodox Church, in Greece, North Macedonia, Bulgaria, Romania, Albania – there are their own church institutions, but the influence of the Serbian Orthodox and Russian Orthodox Churches is noticeable, in the Republika Srpska (BiH), Croatia and Slovenia – also present ROC and SOC)<sup>18</sup>.

At a higher level, the distributors of Kremlin stories are Russian diplomats, or diplomats of the Balkan countries who worked in Russia.

<sup>16</sup> [https://x.com/rybar\\_force/status/1783400095083311252](https://x.com/rybar_force/status/1783400095083311252)

<sup>17</sup> <https://edmo.eu/publications/russian-disinformation-network-pravda-grew-bigger-in-the-eu-even-after-its-uncovering/>

<sup>18</sup> Єгор Браїлян. Православ'я. росія-визволителька. Кустуріца. Як діє російська пропаганда на Балканах, Детектор медіа. 18 грудня 2023 <https://ms.detector.media/propaganda-ta-vplivi/post/33770/2023-12-18-pravoslavnya-rosiya-vyzvolytelka-kusturitsa-yak-diie-rosiyska-propaganda-na-balkanakh/>

## “The Serbian World”

The main pillars of the promotion of Russian influence in the region remain Serbia, Republika Srpska, Bulgaria and Montenegro. The latter two countries continue to demonstrate a pro-Ukrainian position and adhere to it, although the internal situation in both Bulgaria and Montenegro remains very tense due to the coming to power of pro-Russian forces.

Serbia and Republika Srpska (BiH) stand out from the general list of Balkan countries by maintaining open relations with the Russian Federation. And if the Serbian President Aleksandar Vucic is still trying to balance between Moscow and Brussels, the head of the Republika Srpska, Milorad Dodik, does not hide his love for Russia and the desire to get maximum support from it in everything. This explains Dodik's constant visits to Russia for various events. He wants to have the firm support of the Russian leadership if Dodik's plan to proclaim the independence of the Republika Srpska is still implemented not only through statements by the head of the entity.

The threat of the secession of Republika Srpska from the rest of Bosnia and Herzegovina is quite high, but currently unlikely. Although, after the adoption of the resolution on Srebrenica in the UN General Assembly, Milorad Dodik made several loud statements regarding the entity's withdrawal from BiH. Thus, in Republika Srpska, according to Dodik's statements, a working group was created to study the possibilities of separation, but the results of its work were not reported. For the leadership of Republika Srpska, the main thing is to keep the situation in BiH tense to the maximum, so that the USA and the EU are constantly distracted from Kosovo and Ukraine.

Belgrade's politician, who has embarked on a long-outlined plan for building a so-called "Serbian world", raises more questions. The definition arose back in 2016, when the Serbian historian Aleksandar Rakovic began to actively talk about the "Serbian world". He gave his justification for his term in 2020. Immediately after it, the definition became media – it was adopted by journalists, Serbian and Russian propagandists. The real disseminator of ideas was the former Minister of the Interior of Serbia Aleksandar Vulin, who in 2020 in interviews, he repeatedly stated the need to protect the Serbs of the Republika Srpska, Montenegro and Serbia from one center – Belgrade. And in his opinion, it is the current President Vucic who has the strength and ability to implement the "Serbian world" into life. Certain echoes of what Vulin said can be found in the *“National Security Strategy of the Republic of Serbia”*<sup>19</sup> and *“Strategies of Defense of the Republic of Serbia”*<sup>20</sup>, where the boundaries of Serbian interests

<sup>19</sup> Стратегија националне безбедности Републике Србије, 94/2019-13, Службени гласник РС. Број 94. 2019. 27. децембра. Правно информациони систем Владе Србије <https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SIGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/skupstina/strategija/2019/94/2>

<sup>20</sup> Стратегија одбране Републике Србије: 94/2019-4, Службени гласник РС. Број 94. 2019. 27. децембра. Правно информациони систем Владе Србије <https://www.pravno-informacioni-sistem.rs/SIGlasnikPortal/eli/rep/sgrs/skupstina/strategija/2019/94/1>

are clearly defined. According to these documents, Belgrade seeks to protect Serbs in Serbia, Kosovo and Republika Srpska. These tasks clearly correspond to the concept of Serbia's foreign policy called "military neutrality"<sup>21</sup>. And it is also part of the "Serbian world", which acquired new outlines after the All-Serbian Sabor (parliament)<sup>22</sup> was held in Belgrade in early June this year. Vucic and Dodik announced its holding in the spring, but the postponement of the vote in the UN General Assembly of the resolution on Srebrenica forced the leadership of Serbia and Republika Srpska (BiH) to slightly change their plans.

The All-Serbian Sabor was held with the participation of the Chairman of the Parliament of Montenegro Andrie Mandic, a member of the Montenegrin Parliament Milan Knezhevich, representatives of the largest party of Kosovo Serbs "Serbian List", a member of the Parliament of North Macedonia Ivan Stoilkovich, representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church. The key slogan of the event "One people, one assembly – Serbia and Srpska" was embodied in the "Declaration on the Protection of National and Political Rights and the Common Future of the Serbian People"<sup>23</sup>. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, opposition political forces in Montenegro reacted negatively to the holding of the All-Serbian Sabor and the adoption of the "Declaration" at a joint meeting of the governments of Serbia and the Republika Srpska, calling such actions of Belgrade and Banja Luka dangerous. There was no sharp reaction from the EU or the United States, but experts also drew attention to the fact that the "Serbian world" is becoming threatening. A kind of confirmation of this is the desire of the chairman of the Montenegrin parliament Andrije Mandic to hold another meeting of the All-Serbian Sabor in Montenegro. Serbian and Montenegrin media call the approximate date July 12 – the day of Saints Peter and Paul, which Serbs and Montenegrins celebrate on this day.

It is for Montenegro that the "Serbian world" is now perhaps the greatest threat, as it becomes the basis for pro-Serbian and pro-Russian forces to change the state's pro-Western course again towards Moscow. In addition, this is a strong support for Serbian politicians and parties that came to power in Montenegro in last year's parliamentary elections and promised to make Serbian the second official language in the country and introduce Serbian citizenship. Such intentions have been repeatedly announced by Mandych himself and pro-Serbian/pro-Russian politician Milan Knezhevich. These narratives were heard in the statements of representatives of the Serbian Orthodox Church, who came to Montenegro on the eve of parliamentary elections and population census.

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<sup>21</sup> Шимкевич К. Особливості "військового нейтралітету" Сербії у контексті регіональної системи безпеки Балкан, Міжнародні відносини та міжнародне право в постбіполярній системі міжнародних відносин: науковий збірник. Київський університет імені Бориса Грінченка. Київ: [Електронне видання], 2023. С. 127-133.

<sup>22</sup> Ljudmila Cvjetković. Bez pominjanja 'razdruživanja' u BiH u Deklaraciji usvojenoj u prisustvu Vučića i Dodika u Beogradu, Radio Slobodna Evropa, 8. Juni, 2024. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/sabor-srbija-republika-srpska/32983545.html>

<sup>23</sup> Šta piše u Deklaraciji usvojenoj na 'Svesrpskom saboru'? Radio Slobodna Evropa, 8. Juni, 2024. <https://www.slobodnaevropa.org/a/svesrpski-sabor-beograd-deklaracija-sta-pise/32984531.html>



If Serbia has been de facto in a state of frozen European integration since 2020, then Montenegro left this state at the end of June this year and received new requirements for further progress towards EU membership. Now the "Serbian world", like the problems with Croatia due to the adoption of a controversial resolution on the concentration camp during the Second World War, Jasenovac, can become serious obstacles of a purely state nature. In this way, Russia, with the hands of politicians favorable to itself, slows down, complicates the Euroshells of Montenegro and potentially makes it impossible. As is currently observed in the example of Serbia.

The absence of sharp statements by Washington and Brussels on the "Serbian world" is expected, since Serbia, despite the constant criticism of its pro-Russian position by the United States and the EU, continues to be considered by them as an important partner. Without Belgrade, it is impossible to normalize relations with Kosovo, which Serbia continues to consider its southern province. Vucic and his entourage are well aware that there will be no significant pressure on him or the country. Everything will continue to be limited by threats to completely freeze European integration, to introduce personal sanctions against it, to stop providing money from European funds for reforms in the state. The United States and the European Union tolerate both the "Serbian world" and the skillful balancing of Vucic due to the fact that Serbia continues to sell weapons and ammunition to Ukraine and Israel through third countries. Washington and Brussels still have naive hopes for Serbia's reorientation to the West and recognition of Kosovo, if we show the Serbs and their leadership the positive aspects of European integration and cooperation with the United States and European countries. These hopes have long been known in Belgrade and Moscow, so there is such a game that the EU and the US cannot get out of, because then it will be necessary to take really radical steps and put pressure on Vucic. In Moscow, such swings of the United States and the European Union have always been beneficial, because it creates excellent conditions for the spread of hybrid influences, deep penetration into Serbian, Montenegrin and Bosnian societies and imposing their own picture of the world. Because of this, the level of EU support in Serbia, Montenegro, BiH is constantly falling, and there is a growing desire to cooperate with Moscow. In general, this is beneficial for loosening the situation in the whole region, where manifestations of Russian intervention are not so noticeable, but are quite powerful. This is used in the Kremlin and continues to use the Balkans as a territory for opening shell companies, obtaining electronics, components and various products, money laundering through Serbian banks owned by Russians.

## Conclusions and forecasts

Russia successfully uses a full-scale invasion of Ukraine to strengthen its position in the Balkan region. This became possible thanks to the policy of soft power, which the Kremlin officially included in its foreign policy in 2013-2014. In addition, the Russian Federation successfully played on historical and cultural ties in Bulgaria, Greece, Montenegro, Serbia, spinning myths about "ancient historical ties", "brothers-Slavs", "eternal friendship", "Orthodox world", "Russian assistance from Turkey and Austria-Hungary", etc. Of course, an important role in strengthening the position was played by Russia's economic and financial ties with the Balkan countries, as well as the support of the Russian diaspora and support in the region for decades of Russophilia. In this context, it is worth considering several potential scenarios that Russia may try to implement through hybrid influences and propaganda.

## Destabilization of the region through the "Serbian world"

The consequences of the increased Russian presence and influence in the Balkans were the frequent escalation in the north of Kosovo, the practical freezing of the dialogue on normalization between Belgrade and Pristina, the implementation by Serbia, in cooperation with the Republika Srpska (BiH), the pro-Serbian forces in Montenegro and the Serbian Orthodox Church of the concept of the "Serbian world". Its institutional design through joint meetings of the governments of Serbia and Republika Srpska and the planned second All-Serbian Sabor in Montenegro, the adoption of the "Declaration...", the support of the Serbian Orthodox Church is already a threat to the internal stability of Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina. Although this may provoke the reanimation of ideas about "Greater Albania", "Greater Romania", "Greater Bulgaria" and "Greater Greece", potential risks exist due to the constant intervention of pro-Russian forces and attempts to destabilize the Balkans everywhere.

## Complications of interethnic relations

The ideas of the "great" powers are a real problem for every country in the Balkan region and they were actualized in the statements of pro-Russian politicians before the elections to the European Parliament. Open clashes on an interethnic basis in the region can not be expected, but one should be prepared for the active promotion of this issue by Russian propaganda through Telegram channels and other social networks. At risk are North Macedonia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, Croatia (after the early parliamentary elections, there were voices of dissatisfied Croatian Serbs about the possible closure of their newspaper Novosti and the entry of the party "Movement for the Motherland" (Domovinski pokret) into the government coalition. At the same time, the Serbian party for the first time in many years did not get into such a coalition).

There may be a deterioration in relations on a confessional basis between the Serbian Orthodox Church and the Macedonian Orthodox Church, the revision of which the SOC has already announced in the spring.

The worst situation in the interethnic plan will continue to be preserved in the municipalities of Kosovo, where Serbs live, as well as in Bosnia and Herzegovina due to the separatism of Milorad Dodik. It is beneficial for Russia to invest in these trigger points of the region and to heat up the situation as much as possible here, in order to cause concern among the United States and the European Union, which are afraid of the opening of the so-called "Balkan Front".

### **Deepening political crisis and foreign policy problems**

The current crisis in Montenegro and Bosnia and Herzegovina may intensify under significant pressure and presence of Serbian and Russian factors. It is very likely that a difficult internal situation will persist in Bulgaria, where pro-Russian politicians are gaining lost ground and continue to shake the country, although the government continues to demonstrate a pro-European and pro-Ukrainian position. But the head of state Rumen Radev is increasingly showing and voicing anti-Ukrainian narratives.

Problems in North Macedonia and Albania are related to Greece. Athens already threatened last year to impede Albania's European integration, it seems that in this scenario the Greek authorities are ready to act in relation to North Macedonia. Both countries have been waiting for the opening of accession negotiations with the EU for a long time and when this finally happened, Tirana and Skopje began to face new challenges. For North Macedonia, before there was a difficult situation with Bulgaria, now the problem with Greece has been added again. For Moscow, this is a direct way to increase propaganda against European integration in order to undermine the faith of societies in the need to join the EU. News monitoring already shows that the number of such messages is growing. Pro-Russian media in these countries are already making similar inclusions, forming a negative image of the EU.

### **Strengthening the role of the Serbian Orthodox Church**

It is one of the main mouthpieces of Moscow in the Balkans, which successfully and effectively promotes Russian propaganda, Russian values and the Russian view of the region, the events here. The Serbian Orthodox Church is a supporter of the "Russian world" and often compares it with the "Serbian world", talking about them as messianic concepts. In Montenegro, the SOC has for many years been another political player with whom the authorities must reckon and agree on their own position on many issues. In other countries, the Serbian Orthodox Church has the same powerful influence, is one of the centers of espionage activities in Bulgaria, North Macedonia, Slovenia, Croatia, Albania.

## Russian propaganda will become more aggressive, relying on Russophilia

Supporters of Moscow, Russian culture, literature, language, "the greatness of Russian statehood" sat quietly for the first half of 2022, but then quickly regained their lost positions. First of all, it became noticeable on news broadcasts that were broadcast on television. They began to talk less about Ukraine, stories were not the first and not the second, but somewhere in the middle or at the end of issues. Public organizations, the population of countries that favorably treated and continue to treat the Russian Federation, politics and media, representatives of the Russian diaspora began to retell their own versions of a full-scale war, the reasons for the Russian attack on Ukraine, the state of Russian speakers in our state and the "original Russian Crimea". Mobilization in Russia increased the number of Russians in Serbia, Montenegro, Bosnia and Herzegovina. In the Balkan countries, which are members of the EU, the voices of the so-called liberal Russians began to sound louder in the beginning of 2023 regarding the lifting of sanctions against Moscow. Local Russophiles sided with the citizens of the aggressor country, who advocated improving relations with Russia (Slovenia, Bulgaria, Greece). In Montenegro, Russians began to institutionally formalize the diaspora, hold various forums, which, according to unconfirmed information, are financed by Rossotrudnichestvo.

The continuation of academic exchanges, the invitation of guest researchers from Russia to various think tanks or universities leads to the further rooting of Russophilia and the spread of the Russian Federation's vision of the war against Ukraine, the region and the EU.

It is noteworthy that it is from the second half of 2022 there was a narrative that the Russians are victims of the Putin regime, they are not involved in the war that he unleashed. Because of this, in Balkan societies there is no understanding of the causes of Russian aggression, there is no complete information about the crimes of the Russian army, distortion of information and the spread of fakes.

The onslaught of Russian propaganda because of this can be described as more aggressive, undisguised and extremely effective. And he will remain so in the future, since Moscow has what and on whom to rely in its activities in the region.

We should not expect that Serbia will cease to be a satellite of the Kremlin and will break off relations with it by imposing sanctions and refusing to cooperate in critical for Belgrade spheres – energy, gas, defense, technical and military. The Serbian leadership has long been saying that the country is turning into a regional leader in the Western Balkans and wants to act as a guide to other countries of this subregion on the way to the EU. For the Russian Federation, such a position of Serbia is extremely beneficial, because Moscow knows perfectly well the attitude of Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, the opposition forces of Montenegro to such a policy of Belgrade, which is regarded as a new attempt to revive the next version of Yugoslavia and to dictate Serbian conditions for the future in the Western

Balkans. That is why the initiative of Serbia "Open Balkans" was not supported by Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Montenegro. Although Albania and North Macedonia joined, the initiative really remains on paper.

### **Circumvention of sanctions with the help of Serbia and Republika Srpska (BiH)**

For 2022-2024 Moscow has established the export of goods critically needed for its industry, bypassing the sanctions of the EU, USA, Canada. Russians, Belarusians who have Serbian passports or a residence permit in Serbia or Republika Srpska (BiH) help in this.

There are also Serbian entrepreneurs and businessmen who open various companies and are engaged in the purchase of everything that the Russian Federation needs in other countries, in order to then ship the goods to Russian territory.

Being under sanctions of several Serbian companies, politicians, banks does not stop this process, because shadow schemes are implemented with the assistance of other countries – Turkey, China, Kazakhstan, EU member states, which continue to do business with the Russian Federation. But the main centers of circumvention of sanctions continue to be Serbia and Republika Srpska (BiH).

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